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KAZAKHSTAN

SUCCESS STORY

Two Wings Brings Hope to Labor Migrants

A USAID-funded NGO works to improve the status of labor migrants in Kazakhstan



Labor migrants from the neighboring Kyrgyzstan are building a house in Taldy Korgan, Kazakhstan. Photo: EFCA

"It was a revelation for me to see the scale of the construction, how fast our country is growing. But workers should not be exploited."

- Aidar Zhakabaev, NGO worker,
Almaty

Sanjarbek, 19, is spending his summer vacation away from college in a village just outside Almaty. He and nine of his countrymen from Karakalpakstan are building a house for one of the many Kazakhstanis suddenly made wealthy by their country's oil boom. Sanjarbek and his fellow workers say they do not have contracts. But they expect that at the end of the summer, they will get paid several times more than they might have earned at home. But Sanjarbek says he knows from his last job, working on a six-story building in Almaty for a construction company, that payday is not a sure thing.

"I kept asking for my money and they kept saying come back later," he said in Uzbek. "We were all sleeping in the basement and getting sick from the conditions there, so I decided not to wait anymore."

Two Wings, an NGO supported by the USAID-funded Eurasia Foundation of Central Asia, is working to help the thousands of labor migrants working in Almaty Oblast strengthen their legal status and their voice. Each day, Aidar Zhakabaev, a retired construction engineer, and, Gulnora, from an Uzbek NGO, travel the dusty roads of Almaty Oblast interviewing the seasonal workers from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and rural parts of Kazakhstan. They tell the workers that they must not give their passports to their bosses and that they should have labor contracts. They ask if there are any problems, and they hand out cards with phone numbers where they can get help should they need it.

Aidar, 65, also talks with the owners of the houses being built. "It was a revelation for me to see the scale of the construction, how fast our country is growing," he said. But workers should not be exploited. "I tell the owners look, if you went to Uzbekistan, and instead of giving you your salary, they spit on you, how would you feel? Most of them understand," he said.

Not all do though. On a recent visit a construction overseer's temper flared, but Aidar's grey hair and calm manner defuse the situation.

A few kilometers further down the road, eight experts in Islamic architecture are building a mosque that will feature a 21-meter minaret. They sleep in a yurt with a television, cell phone and field kitchen, and their employer sends their salaries directly to their relatives back in Samarkand. These men have expertise that gives them the leverage that younger less skilled people like Sanjarbek lack.

But with the help of Two Wings and five other Kazakhstani NGOs Eurasia Foundation of Central Asia supports with USAID funding, thousands of other seasonal migrants helping to build the Kazakhstani economy also have the chance to improve their legal status and their chances of getting paid for their labor.